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ABSTRACT

Reasons for an open admissions policy in North Dakota, results of this policy, and future considerations are discussed. While graduates of accredited/approved high schools are eligible for college admission to institutions in the state, restrictions exist for out-of-state students. More than 40 programs across the state restrict enrollment, based on capacity, academic requirements, or personal characteristics. Surveys reveal public opinion in favor of open admissions in the state. North Dakotans believe that education has positive results for the individual and the society. Postsecondary education in North Dakota has historically served to compensate for the difficulties in providing high school education in a poor, rural state. Open access to college has promoted social equality and economic progress. Aptitude test scores of students at the University of North Dakota are not low, compared to the national averages. As a state responsibility, an open admissions policy requires financial backing. For students whose preparation has been inadequate, an institution should provide special classes and individual assistance. It is concluded that quality and open admission are not inconsistent. (SW)

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INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT REPORT

Access to Postsecondary Education in North Dakota: A Case for Open Admissions

Robert E. Young
University of North Dakota

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1984

Access to Postsecondary Education in North Dakota: A Case for Open Admissions[1]

Robert E. Young
University of North Dakota[2]

A policy of "open admission" has been tried in North Dakota, and it has succeeded! In this presentation I want to explain why we have chosen this policy, what have been its results, and why we should continue it into the future. I want to be both analytical and argumentative because to understand the issue of access to postsecondary education is as important, I think, as taking a stand for one approach or another.

Open Admissions and What It Means in North Dakota

What is meant by open admissions first needs definition. As most concepts and policies it has had a history.

The Constitution of the State of North Dakota, Article VIII, Sections 1 and 2, states that:

> The legislative assembly shall make provisions for the establishment and maintenance of a system of public schools which shall be open to all children of the state of North Dakota, . . . throughout the state, beginning with the primary and extending through all grades up to and including schools of higher education, except that the legislative assembly may authorize tuition, fees, and service charges to assist in financing of public schools of higher education.

This statement was formed by an ambitious, yet prudent people, first written in the speculative fever of the 1880's, then reiterated and amended in more trying times. It has been used to justify the development of a schooling system alternately experiencing feast and famine. But its most consistent interpretation has been one to ensure access to public education, from elementary through postsecondary, for North Dakotans.

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[1] Prepared for presentation as part of the Quality Education Series: Selective Admissions, sponsored by UND Chapter of the American Association of University Professors, November 29, 1983.

[2] The views presented in this presentation represent those of the presenter, and not necessarily those of the University or the American Association of University Professors.

Today, access to postsecondary education in North Dakota can be fairly described as "open admissions" and "selective enrollments." All residents of North Dakota who are graduates of accredited or approved high schools, who have completed the GED test, or who are in good personal and academic standing at another college or university, are eligible for admission. (Non-residents must rank in the upper half of their high school class, except those from the Red River Valley, who can be admitted if they rank in the upper three quarters of their high school class.) Meeting these criteria, persons are eligible to be admitted to any institution in the state.

Yet, once students arrive, more than 40 programs across the state restrict enrollment, based on capacity, academic requirements, or personal characteristics judged essential to success. For example, at UND to be enrolled in the College of Business and Public Administration a student must have achieved a 2.3 GPA for 24 credit hours. Nursing requires a similar GPA, and specifies the completion of certain courses. The School of Engineering and Mines now requires a "C" grade in each of certain foundation courses taken during the first two years. To be enrolled in the Journalism Department, in addition to GPA and course requirements, a student must pass an English Proficiency Test administered by the Department. And programs in Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, and Medical Technology require stringent 2-year pre-programs, out of which only a certain number are enrolled, these admissions partly determined by personal characteristics displayed by students in their pre-major work. But regardless of these enrollment requirements, any students with the basic qualifications can enter, extend their education, and earn a degree in a wide range of fields.

Though admissions are "open," in the sense that any qualified student may apply. They are not made with the promise of success, with the promise of a degree. It is fair to say that the philosophy of admissions to postsecondary education in North Dakota is one of "let them give it a try, but once in they need to make it on their own." Each institution provides support and assistance for students who have difficulty with their academic work. (At UND we have a Writing Lab, a Math Lab, and a Learning Services which provides reading and study skills assistance and tutoring in academic subjects.) But these services are not extensive, and students are expected to seek them out. Rightly or wrongly in North Dakota in the current era we have not coupled open admissions with "remedial programs," as has been the approach in other places. In North Dakota we have no "back doors" for admission to postsecondary education; and we have few "revolving doors". What we have is a house with many doors, all open if those who enter will only tend to business once they are inside.

Why Has Open Admissions Been Important to North Dakotans?

In a recent survey done by our Bureau of Governmental Affairs, citizens of the state were asked this question: "Which of these statements comes closest to your ideas about higher education? Every high school graduate in North Dakota should have a chance to go to college, regardless of grades. Only students with good high school grades should be admitted to North Dakota colleges. [or] No opinion." For all respondents a majority (55.7%) felt every high school graduate should have the opportunity to attend. A third (38.4%) favored selective admissions, and the rest (6%) had no opinion. Though not overwhelming, a larger number of North Dakotans favor open admissions. But why is this the case, and why has it been the case since the founding of our colleges and universities?

In my opinion it is for reasons of practical circumstance and deeply held social and educational values. I have identified four points to consider.

First, colleges and universities, and the education they provide are a symbol of civilization and prosperity that have been important to North Dakotans as we have defined our identity and presented ourselves to the rest of the country. The state was settled and its institutions created by boomers and speculators who wanted to make the state an attractive place for themselves and for those they hoped would move to this northern plain. Elwyn Robinson has observed "Like the railroads, towns, churches, schools, and newspapers, [colleges and universities] were to help along a speculative boom, to be symbols of civilization that was to come, a part of the dream of the future."[3] Although we have been through boom and bust in our history, I sense that North Dakotans still feel this way about postsecondary education. In a very practical way colleges and universities are part of the dream of the future, for the state and for its citizens as individuals.

Second, because of the sparsity of our population, North Dakotans have given special importance to each and every individual. (This is Elwyn Robinson's idea, as well.) Because there are so few of us, each of us counts, each of us has a role to play, each of us merits the support of the community, each of us deserves an education, even if we fail at it. Couple this value, then, with North Dakotans' well known suspicion of outside control, and it is not hard to understand why open admissions is so important to us as a people. (No other policy quite fits a state that values its people and jeolously guards its autonomy as dearly as

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[3]Robinson, Elwyn. A History of North Dakota. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1966, p. 306.

we do. Do you think a state that distrusts bankers, millers, and railroadmen is going to trust anyone to determine who should or should not be educated in our colleges and universities?)

Third, postsecondary education in North Dakota has historically served to compensate for the difficulties in providing high school education in a poor, rural state. When UND was founded there were only a handful of high schools in the state. If students were going to get a higher education they were not going to get the academic preparation for it in their towns. UND, as is well known, began with virtually no students qualified for college work. It, the University, provided courses, taught by the faculty, to prepare students for the advanced work. Until 1920, the state colleges continued to provide high school programs to compensate for what the rural communities they served could not provide. Today, though we require a high school degree for admission, many small high schools are unable to provide the extent of preparation desired for college entrance. So UND and the other colleges continue to give, quite successfully and I think quite rightly, what high schools simply cannot. We provide much of our "compensatory," "remedial," or "high school" work, whatever you choose to call it, not because students or their schools have failed to achieve, but because they have not had the opportunity to achieve. Again, by circumstance, our postsecondary system plays different roles than those of some other states, and our admissions policy has evolved to serve those roles.

Finally, North Dakota has shared the social philosophy of the rest of the nation. This country, from its earliest days, has pursued a certain egalitarianism, and open access to higher education, whether during the great land grant period or the more recent migration of minorities to

postsecondary education, has been a mechanism for this common value. Open access to postsecondary education has promoted social equality and economic progress through educational opportunity. And, largely, it has been a successful strategy. Policies of ever wider access have removed one barrier after another from the path to higher education and all that it promises: first gender, then geography, then race, then finance, and now the barrier of academic preparation.

We believe as a people that education has positive results for the individual and for the society, and the more education the better. Our history in the United States and in North Dakota has been one of making that education increasingly possible. No wonder the people of the state believe that any person with the gumption should be given access to our educational system, including our colleges and universities.

What Has Been the Results of Open Admission in North Dakota?

Critics of open admission argue that this policy results in reducing institutional or academic standards and diminishing the quality of education provided and received by students. What has been the case in North Dakota?

First, concerning standards, students admitted to UND have abilities greater than those at most institutions across the country. The average composite ACT score, which is the measure most commonly used to characterize the quality of entering students in this part of the country, is 20.5; the national average is 18. Certainly these students represent a range, at UND from 4 to 33. But, on the average, our student body at admission is not shabby by any means.

We all know that ACT scores have been lower for the last generation of college students, but at UND scores did not fall as precipitously and in the past four years have risen faster than scores nationally.

Thus, comparatively and longitudinally, our standards of admission--which means the test scores of those students who choose higher education--do not seem low, as a result of our open admissions policy.

Second, what happens to them once they get here? How does achievement at admission affect performance once enrolled? (And, is it not this question that gets at the heart of the quality issue?) In fact, except at the freshman year students with lower ACT scores do not leave the University in greater numbers than those with higher scores.[4] Students do leave, they tell us, because of inadequate study skills,[5] but these students come from the range of measured abilities at admission.

But for those students that stay, even those with lower scores, success seems possible. A comparison of ACT composite scores at admission with college GPA at each year of attendance suggests, in fact, that during the freshman year students from the lower ACT ranges do not perform as well academically as those from the higher ranges. But by the junior year little, if any, differences in academic performance can be detected across ACT levels.[4] It appears that students, who might be excluded if admission was made by test score, if given an opportunity, do as well as students considered more capable at admission. Thus, students given a chance, perform successfully. Our approach to admissions seems to find validity in the experience of our students.

(Although UND and North Dakota students are our concern, the results of open admissions in other places are similar. At the City University of New York, possibly the system most visibly involved in open admission

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[4]From a study by Robert B.Nelson (Special Assistant to the Vice President for Student Affairs), summarized in a memorandum to Alice Clark (Vice President for Academic Affairs), July 18, 1983.

[5]From Nelson, Robert B. and Donna M. Urff, "Withdrawing/Non-returning Students at the University of North Dakota." Division of Student Affairs Research Report, 1982.

in the last decade, this observation could be made: "Open-admissions or regular-admission status per se was a relatively unimportant predictor of first year outcomes. Although the two groups did indeed differ in many ways . . . it is clear that open-admissions students brought with them to college a number of characteristics besides past achievements that proved to be important predictors of first year outcomes.")[6]

Performance just cannot be predicted with the certainty that our educational and social values demand. It seems that the best way to see if a student is college material is to let him or her try.

Finally, in this analysis of the results of open admissions, it needs to be noted that the benefits of open access to higher education accrue not only to individuals, but to the state and society as well. There are economic and social returns on higher education. Any number of studies suggest that level of income is related importantly to the level of education, and as individual incomes rise so do revenues, through taxation and investment, to support and enhance our society. The Legislative Committee A Task Force on Access to Higher Education has done a good job in portraying the economic return of a policy of open access, and I will not duplicate their argument. Yet, one set of figures bears mention.[7] The cost to the state of educating one student for four years is roughly $11,176. For each person with a four-year degree the tax department estimates a direct return in taxes from income of $25,550. To limit enrollments, it is easy to see, might very well limit economic advantage, public services, and economic development.

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[6]Rossman, Jack E. et al. Open Admissions at City University of New York: An Analysis of the First Year. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice-Hall, 1975.

[7]Access to Higher Education in North Dakota: A Draft Report Submitted to the Higher Education Funding Study Task Force, November 16, 1983. Prepared by the Committee on Access to Higher Education, Charles B. House (Valley City State College), Chair.

The social return, I already have identified. Education, if nothing else, serves to civilize and empower those who recieve it. In assessing open admissions and its complexities, one observer commented, "At least it will give more people the chance to participate in the life of their time, to acquire the skills and perspective that will give them more real power over their own lives, that will help them from being manipulated by forces they barely understand and therefore could never challenge."[8] Persons with some higher education not only have employment and economic advantages, but they are more socially aware, less authoritarian in their relations with others, and more sensitive to the aesthetic side of life. These seem like good characteristics for the citizens of a society, and for as many of those citizens as possible.

In sum, the results of open admission and its benefits are positive. The costs of open access seem outweighed by these benefits, and justified by the results. An open admission policy in North Dakota has been a good policy, a successful policy, a just policy. It fits the values of our people, the circumstances of our state, and our needs for the future. Access to our institutions, regardless of location, financial means, gender, race, and prior educational advantage--in effect, open admissions--should continue.

Educating All Students, A Matter of Responsibility and A Matter of Quality

Adapted to our circumstances, consistent with the character and values of our people, and positive in its results for students and the state, the policy of open access should continue. But how do we go about educating the students who are admitted? This seems to me to be a more important question.

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[8] C.M. Editorials: The Case for Open Admission. Change, Summer 1973.

The people of this state want us to educate their children--and increasingly to educate themselves, too. They want us to treat each individual with respect and care. They want us to give an opportunity where one may not have been available in previous schooling. This casts our work as faculty members. It is our responsibility to educate all students, to the best of our ability and their's.

Sure, some students are easier and more gratifying to teach than others. (I think some of the call for selective admissions rests with this fact.) And, certainly we have a responsibility to take the brightest students to greater heights of achievement. But to choose to teach only the most able flatly means shirking some of our responsibility. The job can be a tough one, a frustrating one, a time and resource consuming one, but it is our job. And, seen through the lenses of the practicalities and values that I tried to portray earlier, it is a job of great importance, and of great satisfaction. As I sat this morning preparing these remarks, Norton Kinghorn called to give me an argument for open admission that he thought few would mention. He told me of the personal and professional reward he receives, still 28 years into his career, from taking a student who shows little promise and helping that student achieve significant learning. He described a lack of opportunity he would feel if more selective admissions removed those students from his realm as a teacher. So as teachers, if we look at it right, a policy of open admission offers good work and great reward.

But as teachers we cannot do it alone. (And I think this, too, is where much of the frustration and wish for more selective admissions begins.) The institution and the state have responsibilities as well. Open admissions without adequate resources is meaningless, if not cruel.

Students will enroll in our institutions who need academic support of one kind or another, more support than a faculty member can provide. For students whose preparation has been inadequate, for many not of their own device, an institution should provide special classes and individual assistance. This has been the practice at UND since its founding, with the Preparatory School. Today, as mentioned earlier, a Writing Clinic, Math Lab, and Learning Services exist to assist faculty to bring that student whom Norton Kinghorn describes into the picture of a college education.

As a state responsibility, a policy of open admissions requires the financial backing to pull it off. However, much as the values of optimism, individual worth, and opportunity have spawned a practice of open admissions, the other side of the North Dakota character--caution and conservatism--has denied the real promise of this practice. The state, although appropriating the fourth highest per capita expenditure for higher education in the country, tries to educate more students than most states with its expenditure. We spend $4,294 in state funds to educate each student, the national average for states is $5,500.[9] To educate all students, which is <u>our responsibility</u>, would seem to require more resources than we presently spend. How many more dollars, I do not know. But it should be an amount which represents a financial commitment as strong as the belief in open access.

It is at this juncture of my argument that I am willing to raise the question of <u>quality</u>. Quality is determined by what happens after a student enrolls, not by what he lacks at admission. With a clear sense of our responsibility--and rewards--in educating the students of this

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[9]Access to Higher Education in North Dakota: A Draft Report Submitted to the Higher Education Funding Study Task Force, op. cit.

state and region, and with the resources to do the job, we can provide a quality of education that we all can respect. With the faculty and staff we have now and with our existing resources, we have done well; we have been successful with open admissions. But this debate and the attention being given to this issue around the state suggests that we--faculty, institutions, and state--are being asked to look for new heights. If we set our minds to it, we can provide a quality education for those students who have chosen to come to us. Quality and open admission do not need to be inconsistent.

Let me finish by remembering one student of this University, possibly its most famous and distinguished graduate: Maxwell Anderson. Maxwell Anderson's ACT scores are lost to history, but he described himself, in a "Love Letter to A University," as an indifferent student, with knowledge of only English literature when he entered the University. Now, granted he had read most of the well known novelists and poets to his day. But would he have achieved a 21 on the ACT, and would he have graduated in the top half of his high school class, or would he have taken enough "solids" to gain admission to a more selective UND? We don't know. But just to imagine that he would not is enough to give pause to a consideration of more selective admissions. Anderson concludes his "Love Letter" in this way: ". . . so I write this note of grateful appretiation to my alma mater, thanking it for being there when I needed it so badly, and for supplying hope to the current crop of youngsters as they come to it from the windy plains." Our generations of students need us to be here; and they look for that same hope in a higher education maybe more so, today. To reduce opportunities for education, in any way, reduces that hope.

Education is our calling as faculty members, it is the unique function of our institution, it is essential in our society. It is our job. Why back away from it?

Author Biographical Note

Robert E. Young is Associate Professor and Director, Office of Instructional Development at the University of North Dakota. He holds a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from Michigan State University.